

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS: FROM FORMAL COMPLIANCE TO COMPETENCE-BASED THINKING

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Abstract: In recent years, Applied Linguistics programs have expanded rapidly in response to the growing demand for language-related professionals in education, international communication, translation, and academic writing. However, despite the presence of curricula, assessment systems, and formal quality assurance (QA) mechanisms, concerns persist regarding the alignment between learning outcomes, assessment practices, and real-world competencies. This paper argues that quality assurance in Applied Linguistics is often reduced to formal compliance and documentation rather than being utilized as a developmental and preventive mechanism (Harvey & Green, 1993; ENQA, 2015). Drawing on a competence-based perspective and the experience of public oversight structures, the paper proposes a reframing of QA as a tool for aligning educational intentions, assessment practices, and labor market expectations. The study highlights key gaps in current practices and offers practical recommendations for fostering an internal quality culture within Applied Linguistics education.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Applied Linguistics, Competence-Based Education, Learning Outcomes, Assessment, Quality Culture.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Republic of Uzbekistan has undertaken comprehensive reforms aimed at strengthening quality assurance across all levels of the education system, from general and vocational education to higher education and doctoral training. These reforms are driven by the national agenda to enhance human capital, ensure international comparability of qualifications, and align educational outcomes with labor market and societal needs. A key milestone in this process has been the establishment of a national quality assurance framework, including the creation of a specialized Quality Assurance Agency mandated to coordinate quality assurance processes across sectors and to foster a coherent quality culture within the education system. Importantly, the national QA agency is being developed in close cooperation with internationally recognized quality assurance bodies, including collaboration with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) of the United Kingdom, ensuring alignment with globally accepted standards, principles, and good practices. Within this evolving policy context, Applied Linguistics programs—particularly those delivered through transnational and joint educational initiatives—represent a critical testing ground for implementing competence-based quality assurance models that integrate institutional autonomy, accountability, and international benchmarking.

Applied Linguistics occupies a strategic position in contemporary higher education, bridging language theory with real-world professional practice. Universities increasingly offer Applied Linguistics programs to meet the demands of education systems, international communication, translation, and academic and professional writing in a globalized context (Knight, 2008; Altbach et al., 2009). While the structural components of educational quality—curricula, assessments, and accreditation procedures—are formally in place,

questions remain about the effectiveness of these mechanisms in ensuring meaningful learning outcomes.

In many contexts, graduates of Applied Linguistics programs possess diplomas and test-based certifications but encounter difficulties demonstrating professional competencies in real-life settings. This situation reflects a broader skills mismatch widely discussed in higher education research (OECD, 2019). It raises a critical question: are existing quality assurance mechanisms genuinely aligned with the competencies required in applied linguistic practice, or do they primarily serve formal and administrative purposes (Biggs & Tang, 2011)?

This paper examines quality assurance in Applied Linguistics from a competence-oriented perspective. Rather than viewing QA as a control or inspection mechanism, the study argues for its role as a framework for reflective alignment between learning outcomes, assessment practices, and societal needs (ENQA, 2015; Harvey, 2006).

2. Quality Assurance: Misconceptions and Limitations

Quality assurance in higher education is frequently perceived as an external requirement linked to accreditation, audits, and compliance with predefined standards. In such interpretations, QA becomes synonymous with documentation, reporting, and checklist-based evaluations (Harvey & Green, 1993; Schindler et al., 2015). While these elements are necessary for transparency and accountability, their dominance can lead to a formalistic approach that prioritizes procedural correctness over educational substance.

In Applied Linguistics, this compliance-oriented understanding of QA often results in the replication of standard course descriptions and assessment formats without sufficient reflection on their relevance to professional practice. As a consequence, pedagogical innovation may be constrained, and quality assurance is perceived by educators as an administrative burden rather than a supportive mechanism (ENQA, 2015; Harvey, 2006).

When reduced to compliance, quality assurance risks losing its developmental potential. Instead of fostering improvement, it may reinforce static practices that fail to respond to evolving linguistic, technological, and labor market demands (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2015).

3. Applied Linguistics and the Competence Gap

A key challenge in Applied Linguistics education lies in the articulation and measurement of competencies. Learning outcomes are frequently expressed in terms of language proficiency levels or theoretical knowledge, while applied competencies—such as discourse analysis, academic writing, professional communication, and decision-making in multilingual contexts—remain insufficiently operationalized (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Council of Europe, 2020).

Assessment practices further contribute to this gap. Standardized tests and written examinations are effective in measuring discrete knowledge and linguistic accuracy but often fail to capture complex, context-dependent competencies required for professional performance (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Sadler, 2010). As a result, assessment outcomes may not accurately reflect graduates' readiness for professional tasks.

This misalignment between learning outcomes and assessment practices suggests that what is measured is not always what is most educationally valuable. In Applied Linguistics, where contextual application is central, the inability to assess authentic performance undermines the credibility of educational outcomes (OECD, 2019; Schindler et al., 2015).

4. Reframing Quality Assurance: A Public Council Perspective

From the perspective of public oversight and advisory structures, quality assurance should function not as a corrective or punitive mechanism, but as a preventive and

developmental framework (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014; ENQA, 2015). In this view, QA serves to align educational intentions with learning processes and outcomes, ensuring coherence across curricula, teaching, and assessment.

In Applied Linguistics, reframing QA involves shifting the focus from external compliance to internal quality culture. This includes:

- clearly articulated competence-based learning outcomes,
- assessment tools that reflect authentic professional tasks,
- continuous feedback loops involving educators, students, and employers.

Such an approach positions quality assurance as a shared responsibility rather than an imposed obligation. It enables educators to engage with QA as a means of professional support and pedagogical reflection rather than as an external constraint (Harvey, 2006; Ministry of Higher Education of Uzbekistan, 2022).

Conclusion

Quality assurance in Applied Linguistics should not be reduced to documentation and formal compliance (Harvey & Green, 1993; ENQA, 2015). When understood as a reflective and competence-oriented framework, QA has the potential to bridge the gap between educational intentions, assessment practices, and professional realities. By fostering an internal quality culture and prioritizing meaningful competencies, Applied Linguistics programs can better prepare graduates for the complex demands of contemporary linguistic practice.

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6. Alignment of Learning Outcomes and Competencies. Learning outcomes should explicitly describe what graduates are expected to do in professional contexts, beyond language proficiency.
7. Authentic Assessment Practices. Assessment methods should be designed to evaluate applied competencies through tasks that simulate real-world linguistic challenges (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Sadler, 2010).
8. Internal Quality Culture. Institutions should promote QA as a developmental process that supports educators and enhances pedagogical autonomy (ENQA, 2015; Harvey, 2006).
9. Stakeholder Engagement. Input from employers and professional communities should inform curriculum design and quality evaluation processes (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2015).

10. Reflective QA Mechanisms. Quality assurance processes should encourage continuous reflection and improvement rather than episodic compliance.
11. These measures can strengthen the relevance and credibility of Applied Linguistics education while preserving academic integrity.
12. Ultimately, quality assurance is not a question of whom to inspect, but of what and how we choose to value in education (UNESCO, 2015; Schindler et al., 2015).
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